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HOW CAN I MAKE MY COMMUNITY ACT?

Having read in this handbook about the seismic hazards and risks in various parts of the United States, you are probably trying to decide where your community fits in. This chapter is designed to help you determine the risk at your specific location and formulate an action plan that will fill your local needs.

Building on the advice presented in earlier chapters, a series of steps are described here to help you develop a practical and effective approach to reducing your community's exposure to seismic hazards.

KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY'S RISK

To determine your community's seismic risk, you need to take into account:

- The nature of the earthquake hazard as determined by scientists,
- The extent to which your community is aware of and informed about seismic hazards,
- The extent of education and mitigation efforts already made, and
- The degree of risk that your community will be willing to accept.

To help you define your community's seismic situation, consult such groups as:

- Geologists, geophysicists, and seismologists at local academic institutions or in private practice,
- Your state's geologist,
- The regional offices of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the U.S. Geological Survey,
- The national earthquake information centers, and
- State and regional seismic safety organizations.

Once you determine that your community is at moderate to high risk from earthquakes and related hazards like landslides, go on to the next step.

BECOME FAMILIAR WITH YOUR LOCAL BUILDING REGULATIONS

Find out if your local building regulations provide for seismic protection. If they do, determine what level of protection is provided and how that level was established. If your local building code does not provide for seismic protection or if it does not provide adequately for such protection, discuss your concerns with:

- Your local building officials and
- Knowledgeable individuals from the local chapters of professional societies and organizations and from local academic institutions.

During such discussions, identify the possible impacts on various segments of your community of introducing new or more stringent seismic provisions into the regulations. Establish, insofar as possible, who will benefit and, therefore, most likely favor improved code regulations and who will be adversely affected and opposed. Try to determine if the concerns are real or imaginary.

If by now you believe that your community is at risk but have found that, for one reason or another, the responsible officials have not taken appropriate action, you will have to step up efforts to increase awareness of the seismic risk in your community. Consider the information in Appendix B, which explains how the building regulatory system works and describes how code changes are made.

ORGANIZE, INFORM, EDUCATE

Even in some cities without seismic codes, some individuals, organizations, and companies have already taken steps to increase seismic safety, and they may provide the core of a group of actively interested persons. It also might be wise to link up with adjacent and nearby jurisdictions to develop a network of communities (as well as counties and states if appropriate) in a seismic zone to engage in cooperative, comprehensive seismic safety planning.

In the past few years, a number of state and regional seismic organizations have sprung up to address the geophysical and other conditions that exist in the various seismic zones in the United States. For example, the Central United States Earthquake Consortium (CUSEC) has been organized to promote understanding of the Mississippi Valley seismic zone and to foster seismic safety efforts in the 7 states and 24 major cities that are located in that zone. Other state, regional, and national seismic organizations can provide you with contacts and scientific, educational, and organizational advice.

Building community members and seismic safety proponents who have participated in the BSSC program have emphasized that three groups must be made aware of seismic issues if an effort to change a community's seismic safety policy is to be successful:

- Public officials,
- Building community professionals (engineers, architects, etc.), and
- The general public.

These three groups can be informed and educated through articles and reports, through meetings and conferences, through video tapes and computer software, through direct and indirect technical assistance, and in a variety of other ways. It is most important that you:

- Develop a coordinated approach to informing and educating them and
- Provide information and education in a manner understandable to the specific group being addressed.
- Develop information and education materials that are tailored to fill each group's specific needs.

Public officials can be addressed through such organizations as the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National League of Cities, the International City Management Association, the National Association of County Officials, and organizations of functional specialists such as city planners, financial officials and community development specialists.

A good way to educate and inform building community professionals is to work through the local chapters of building officials' organizations, the local chapters of professional associations or societies (e.g., the American Institute of Architects, the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Associated General Contractors of America, and the American Consulting Engineers Council), the local structural engineers association, and the various building product organizations.

The general public can be approached through special-purpose seismic organizations, through the local media, and through existing organizations such as public interest groups, voluntary agencies, and other benevolent groups (e.g., PTAs and PTOs, civic clubs, fraternal organizations, the League of Women Voters, and scouting organizations).

If the general public and the various building professionals in your community become fully aware of the seismic situation and conclude that the benefits to be derived from increased protection through building regulation are worth the costs, they can and most likely will be strong advocates when you proceed to the next step.

MOTIVATE LOCAL PUBLIC LEADERS

Local elected and appointed officials play an especially important role in seismic safety efforts. Their attitude with respect to seismic hazard mitigation will be of critical importance in achieving seismic safety objectives. It is therefore essential that the means of educating them about seismic issues be well thought out and that they be approached at the right time.

A BSSC study of societal implications shed some light on the degree of interest in seismic safety of elected and appointed officials. Seismic safety code regulations often are not an issue of high priority for the chief elected and appointed officials and executives of any of the cities and counties visited. The chief building department officials who participated appeared to reflect a full array of positions from pro to con regarding the adoption of new or more stringent seismic safety code requirements.

The general consensus is that a movement to promote improved seismic safety for new buildings will be successful only if it has sufficient "grass roots" support to stimulate public leaders to act. In fact, several seismic safety movements reflect such a "bottom up" approach, and some seismic safety proponents have urged that public officials not even be approached until a united front has been developed by other segments of the community including researchers, academicians, engineers, architects, voluntary agencies, and public interest groups.

INFORMATION SOURCES

In addition to the information sources described above, consult the list of publications in Appendix E.